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Economic Research Service

A Bimonthly Newsletter for ERS Employees and Others in Cooperating Institutions

Managing Information in ERS

This is the first in a series of articles on information management in ERS. This article covers the newly adopted 5 year information management plan and the status of automated data processing (ADP), word processing (WP), and information dissemination in ERS. Future Newsletters will carry articles on specific information management objectives.

Information Management Plan

The information management plan details the ERS-wide policies and strategies on ADP, WP, and information dissemination during 1984-88, including decisions on equipment purchases and staffing requirements.

Information management encompasses the collection, analysis, production, and dissemination of economic information and data, and is, consequently, central to the mission of ERS. Data processing technology has advanced to where many of the boundaries between the traditional fields of ADP and publishing have become indistinct, and opportunities for coordination and sharing of technology have increased. Additionally, issues of compatibility of equipment and effective management of information resources have motivated formal planning in this area.

The plan describes five broad information management "goals" and strategies to accomplish those goals via 18 specific "objectives." The goals are:

1. Increase productivity and program effectiveness through more efficient use of information resources.
2. Provide improved user services in terms of responsiveness and quality.
3. Improve capabilities and

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coordination through automation,^{HRDS} integration, and the use of interactive systems.

4. Support ERS long range program planning through automated information management systems using modern technology.

5. Further USDA information resources management goals.

Specific objectives outlined in the plan are:

1. Determine ERS policy on the content, operation, planning, and management of ADP and information dissemination.

2. Develop and implement an improved management information system.

3. Develop and implement a comprehensive training program for ERS staff to improve communications and planning, facilitate the introduction of new technology, and improve productivity.

4. Establish a continuing information management planning process, including effective feedback and communication mechanisms.

5. Complete the development and implementation of ARIES (Automated Research Information for Economic Studies), an ERS-wide database.

6. Compile an automated directory of ERS data series.

7. Improve file management and

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develop standards for data documentation.

8. Improve the acquisition and collection of data from external sources and achieve effective sharing of those data.

9. Investigate alternatives for improving the collection, storage, and analysis of cross sectional and hierarchical data in ERS.

10. Develop a quality control program to assess the quality of information sources, processes, and outputs.

11. Improve the existing internal and external computer system configuration available to ERS.

12. Provide full access to integrated work stations for ERS researchers and support staff.

13. Identify information management requirements for new office space, and plan and manage the relocation of ADP equipment.

14. Provide linked information services in support of field assignments of ERS staff.

15. Develop and implement an ERS plan for electronic dissemination of information.

16. Develop and implement an integrated publications process.

17. Identify requirements and acquire equipment for an automated graphics system.

18. Provide interactive electronic information access to the ERS information base.

Current Status

Much of ERS's current program of research, outlook forecasting, policy analysis, and data collection depends on the use of automated files, databases, models, graphics, and word processing. ERS's Data Services Center (DSC) provides ADP and database development and management support with its staff of computer programmers and analysts. The Economics Management Staff (EMS) maintains a central publishing center that provides WP support for ERS's outlook publications. EMS also provides editorial, arts and graphics, radio,

television, and printing services in support of ERS's information dissemination program.

Much of ERS's data processing is done on USDA's Washington Computer Center's (WCC) computer, with remote job entry and output through ERS equipment. Most ADP program development and some preprocessing of data are done on ERS's own minicomputer. The current configuration of the minicomputer includes a processor capable of executing about 200,000 instructions per second, six disk drives, one tape drive, one card reader, two line printers, and 20 terminals.

ERS also has graphics terminals and plotters that are used to produce overhead projection transparencies. Interfaces have also been developed that allow ERS researchers to use sophisticated software at WCC to produce State and county maps.

Microcomputers are being used by ERS researchers to reduce the cost of entering data into WCC's computer, enhance WP capacity, and do economic and statistical analyses using commercial software packages or user developed programs.

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Computer Workshop Draws Broad Audience in Oregon

ERS, the Farm Foundation, and the Department of Agricultural Economics at Oregon State University sponsored a workshop on "Computer Use by, and Computer Interfaces Among, Agricultural Economics Institutions." The workshop, in Eugene, Oregon, November 15-16, attracted participants representing USDA agencies, State extension services, and researchers from several agricultural economics departments.

The basic aim was to begin a dialog among agricultural economists on the current and potential computer interfaces among Federal, State, and university institutions. Sessions

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Administrator's Letter

A Message from John Lee

ERS is an institution with unique opportunities and tremendous potential. I believe that the benefits of doing our job well have never been greater.

U.S. agriculture and rural America have gone through changes of unprecedented magnitude since World War II. Agricultural markets have been internationalized. Rural America is no longer primarily agrarian. Farms that are fewer but larger, using high technology and much capital, are still mostly sole proprietorships, but they have replaced the millions of smaller, capital short family farms which once characterized the farm sector.

Those and related institutional, economic, and technological changes are gradually being understood. That new understanding is, in turn, raising questions about the role and objectives of public intervention in agriculture, natural resources, and rural America, and about how intervention affects performance.

Providing an economic and social science information base for addressing those questions—indeed, for assuring that the important questions are asked—is a primary reason for ERS's existence.

ERS has to be many things to many people, but it cannot be all things to all people. Our resources, though ample, are finite. The number of researchable problems that we could be addressing far exceeds what we can do. Thus we have to ask ourselves, Are we, as a Federal agency, doing the most important things?

ERS has four major responsibilities. All require a solid base of expertise, economic data, and tools for applying the expertise and data.

First is the responsibility to analyze the current situation and outlook. That includes our traditional situation and outlook reporting, which must be sufficiently analytical to explain the forces influencing the situation and prospects for the future. Outlook includes forecasting a year or two ahead and projecting 5 and 10 years (and occasionally longer). The purpose is to provide understanding of alternative scenarios for the future, the interactions of economic forces and assumptions that make up those scenarios, and how those forces and scenarios would affect the outcomes of public policies and private investment decisions. Not that we should devote our resources to abstract futurism. Rather, what is needed is practical analysis of economic and other forces, where they might be taking us, and what it all might mean.

Second is the responsibility to put current issues and concerns into economic perspective. Too often people respond to a perceived problem which may only be a manifestation of a more fundamental, underlying problem. Issues such as soil erosion, rural poverty, and the changing structure of agriculture draw emotional responses. ERS's job is to provide the information that puts those issues into clearer perspective to facilitate a more informed response.

Third, we must examine how well agricultural and rural institutions perform and how their performance is affected by public policies. That work must be the heart of our research program if we are to be useful to those who make and carry out policies. Research on consequences of public intervention can be difficult and risky. It may often require examination of the validity of premises on which policies and programs are founded. I expect to devote a future letter to this area of ERS's responsibility.

Fourth, ERS must draw on all the above activities and capacities to do the staff work necessary to the decisionmaking process. Staff work ranges from quick turnaround responses to studies that may take a year or longer. Such work is highly demanding professionally and requires command of economic theory and proficiency in applying a wide range of analytic tools.

There are many ways to categorize ERS's work, but if we excel in the four areas outlined here, we will serve our constituency well.

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[Computer Workshop, continued from page 2.] included: discussion of current computer uses and plans of USDA agencies, discussion of interface issues among computer users, and discussion of policy issues relating to computer usage.

Four major themes became evident at the conference:

1. The computer revolution will, in the very near future, significantly change how USDA processes and disseminates information.

Computerization of the information dissemination process will change how State extension and land grant universities interact with the USDA agencies.

2. The potential exists for improving the analysis and delivery of policy relevant information by appropriate interfacing of USDA computerized information systems with State extension and university systems.

3. Better coordination among USDA, Extension, and university professionals involved in computer applications is needed.

4. Microcomputers and networks of microcomputers will radically change the way agricultural economists interact. The use of electronic computer assisted communication will lead to changes in the agricultural economics profession.

One result of the conference: an electronic bulletin board for policy researchers and policy extension specialists is being set up by ERS (contact ERS Food and Agricultural Policy Branch Chief Jim Zellner for details--Room 120-GHI, ERS/USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250-1800, 202-447-4943).

Discussions have also begun on ways to increase the communication among the agricultural economics professionals involved in the computer revolution through a regional research committee, development of a journal, further workshops, and increased use of electronic bulletin boards (contact ERS Economist Russell Gum if you have

comments, suggestions, or would like further information--325 Extension Hall, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon 97331, 503-757-4804).

Computers offer great potential to improve the output of agricultural economics institutions but capturing that potential will require better communication and coordination and bold actions to keep up with the revolution.

Conferences

IED Staff Members Speak at African Food Crisis Conference

ERS economists were instrumental in organizing panels at the 26th annual meeting of the African Studies Association, in Boston, Massachusetts, December 7-10, 1983. The theme was "The Food Crisis in Africa." ERS's Deputy Director of the International Economics Division (IED) Charles Hanrahan chaired one panel on the role of agricultural research in Sub-Saharan Africa, which heard papers by four panelists, including ERS economists Arthur Dommen and Brian D'Silva. IED's Africa and Middle East Branch Chief Cheryl Christensen chaired another panel on African food and agricultural policy, at which four panelists presented papers, including ERS economists Arthur Dommen, Larry Witucki, and Michael Cullen.

IED staff made a number of other contributions to the session, attended by an estimated 3,000 African studies specialists from the United States, Canada, Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Cheryl Christensen took part in a panel on perspectives on the African food crisis, and Mary Burfisher contributed a paper on Cameroon in another panel.

Trade Research Consortium Focuses on Mexican Agriculture and Trade

ERS's International Economics Division (IED) cosponsored with USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service the fifth meeting of the Trade Research Consortium in Rio Rico, Arizona, December 15-17, 1983. The Consortium is comprised of

government and university trade experts from the United States and Canada. Topics included the economic situation in Mexico, internationalization of financial markets and their relation to trade, U.S.-Mexican trade environment, agricultural policy in general, policies related to trade in fresh winter vegetables, U.S.-Mexican agricultural interdependence, Mexico's ability to meet food consumption requirements, and the U.S. demand for migrant farm labor.

Abstracts of the papers presented at the meeting will be available. Contact one of the editors of the Proceedings--IED Deputy Director Charles Hanrahan, Room 348-GHI, ERS/USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250-1800 (202-447-8219), or Maury Bredahl (University of Missouri)--for more information.

Public Management and Rural Development Symposium

ERS's Economic Development Division (EDD) has been requested to plan an international symposium at Williamsburg, Va., to be hosted by USDA and held under the auspices of the Technical Cooperation Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Participants will examine the role of rural government in facilitating and managing rural development...the capacity of local governments to manage change...the role of information in improving the performance of local government...appropriate technologies for development of rural areas.

For additional details, contact EDD Director Kenneth Deavers, the "working" chairperson of the symposium (Room 460-GHI, ERS/USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250-1800, 202-447-8225).

ERS Participation in ASSA

The Allied Social Science Associations held their annual meeting on December 28-30, 1983, in San Francisco. ERS Economists Charles Hanrahan, William Reeder, and Larry Salathe presented papers; Donald Lerman, Bela Mukhoti, and

[then ERS Economist] Laura Blanciforti formally discussed papers; and Bela Mukhoti presided over a session.

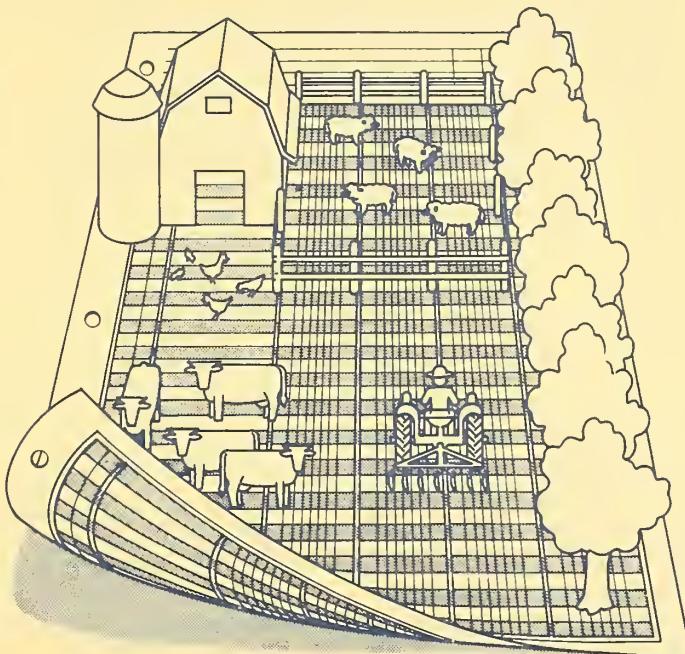
Current Publications

New Economic Indicators Available

A new report, Costs of Production, has been added to the ERS Economic Indicators of the Farm Sector series. The other reports are Farm Sector Review, Income and Balance Sheet Statistics, State Income and Balance Sheet Statistics, and Production and Efficiency Statistics.

For the first time, in Costs of Production, 1982, ERS estimates costs of production for all major commodities in one publication, using revised and improved procedures for estimating and displaying costs of production. The new procedures are consistent with those used in the farm income accounts. This year's report on costs of production, which covers 1980-82, explains the new methods and compares them with the old.

All subscribers to the Economic Indicators of the Farm Sector series will automatically receive the new report. Subscriptions to the series are available for \$15; individual reports



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are \$5.50 each. Order from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 (202-783-8238).

Dairy Study Outlines Policy Options

A study of the Federal Government's dairy program operations mandated by the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 was recently transmitted to Congress. The study analyzes the effects of the current milk price support program and Federal milk marketing orders and probable impacts of alternative measures. It also examines the economic setting for the dairy industry in the 1980's, concluding that without Government support, milk prices would have to fall 15 to 20 percent below 1983 levels (in real terms) to avoid surpluses during the remainder of the 1980's.

Among the alternatives that the study assesses are: (1) changes in support levels, support mechanisms, and marketing orders; (2) elimination of programs; and (3) introduction of supply controls or deficiency payments.

The analysis was conducted by a team of economists from ERS, Cornell University, and the University of Wisconsin, under the leadership of ERS Senior Economist Richard Heifner. Copies of the ERS Staff Report, "A Review of Existing and Alternative Federal Dairy Programs," are available from the Information Division, Room 440-GHI, USDA/EMS, Washington, D.C. 20250-3500 (202-447-4230).

Personnel News

New ERS Branch Chief

Lester Myers is the new Chief of the Food Economics Branch, National Economics Division. He comes to ERS from Chase Econometrics where he served as Director of International Agricultural Services and was involved in international consulting and model development.

He has an impressive background in food demand and marketing, with a Ph.D.

in agricultural economics from Purdue University and an M.S. in agricultural economics from the University of Connecticut. For over 12 years he was on the faculty of the Food and Resource Economics Department at the University of Florida where he directed the work of 25 graduate students. He has taught consumption and demand economics at the graduate level. Research conducted under his general direction has received awards for quality of research discovery (1977 and 1979) and best master's thesis (1979) from the American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA). While at the University of Florida, he also coordinated the Department's research program for several years.

Myers also has experience in applied economic research and analysis. He was Director of the Economic Research Development of the Florida Department of Citrus with full responsibility for all economic research and analysis relating to the marketing of Florida citrus products. Research under his leadership encompassed consumer behavior and demand, long and short term economic outlook, industry organization and structure, advertising and promotion policies, economic impacts of Government and industry regulations and programs, and international trade. In addition, he has served as Associate Editor of the American Journal of Agricultural Economics and is currently a Director of AAEA.

China Section Changes Leaders

ERS Economist Frederic Surls is the new Leader of the China Section, Asia Branch, International Economics Division (IED). He has been in the China Section since joining ERS in 1975. Surls has an M.A. in economics from the University of Michigan, and was on the faculty of the Economics Department of Alma College in Michigan prior to coming to ERS. He has lived in Taiwan and Hong Kong, reads and speaks Chinese, and has authored numerous papers on the Chinese economy.

Surls' predecessor, Charles Liu, left IED after directing the research and

ERS is More Than Economists

The preponderance of economists in ERS (nearly 500) sometimes obscures the existence and significant contributions of other professionals in ERS. There are about 10 each of social science analysts, historians, sociologists, and statisticians. In addition, there are 1 or 2 each of foreign affairs specialists, geographers, accountants, attorneys, operations research specialists, mathematicians, and mathematical statisticians.

Administrative, technical, and clerical support for ERS is provided by other professionals whose names rarely appear on ERS's products, but without whom there would be no products.

outlook work on Chinese agriculture for over 10 years. He is establishing a private consulting firm on Chinese matters in the Washington, D.C., area. Liu had major responsibilities in planning and arranging scientific exchanges between USDA and various Chinese ministries, and played an important role in the entire range of USDA activities with China. In 1981, he received the Department's Superior Service Award in recognition of his contributions to USDA's China program.

New Trade and Development Section Leader

Mathew Shane is the new Leader of the Trade and Development Section, Agricultural Development Branch, International Economics Division. He has a Ph.D. from the Krannert Graduate School of Management at Purdue University with a concentration on the role of financial markets in economic growth and development. After graduating from Purdue, he was on the faculty at the University of Minnesota. Most recently, he was involved in

development planning, policy analysis, and program implementation as a consultant to the Malaysian Government.

The Australian Connection

In the spring of 1984, ERS expects to send Milton Erickson, Crops Branch Chief in ERS's National Economics Division, to work with Australia's Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) for a year as part of a continuing exchange program. The role of the BAE in the Australian Government's Ministry of Primary Industry is similar to ERS's in USDA.

Since 1980, six people have participated in the exchange program. Due to similarities in function and in the training of their staffs--as well as the high caliber of the people involved--both organizations have profited from the exchange.

Current participants are BAE's Henry Haszler, now in Washington, D.C., and ERS's William Coyle, now in Canberra. Earlier, the BAE's Robert Bain and James Longmire and ERS's Larry Deaton and Robert Bohall took part in the exchange.

Vacancy Announcement: Farm Production Economics Section Leader

ERS's National Economics Division is recruiting to fill a key vacancy in its Farm Sector Economics Branch. The Farm Production Economics Section Leader manages a program of firm (farm) level economic research and policy analysis and supervises a staff of five economists.

The position is open to all U.S. citizens who meet the basic eligibility requirements for supervisory agricultural economist (GM-110-14). The beginning salary is \$42,722 per year. The deadline for receipt of applications is March 2, 1984. For details, contact the ERS Examining Unit, USDA, EMS, PD, Room 1443, South Building, Washington, D.C., 20250-3500 (202-447-7638).

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[Managing Information in ERS, continued from page 2.]

Implementation of the first phase of a database management system for ERS is underway. That system includes a data naming convention, a data dictionary, and user access to time series data.

Copies of the management information plan may be obtained from Robert Rovinsky, Deputy Director of ERS's Data Services Center, Room 1D6-GHI, ERS/USDA, Washington, D.C. 2025D-18DD (2D2-447-5457).

Vacancy Announcement Policy

Announcements will appear only for (1) supervisory, management, or senior research positions at grade 13 or above, (2) positions that are open to all U.S. citizens who meet the basic eligibility requirements, and (3) those positions that have deadlines for receipt of applications at least 2 weeks after release of the Newsletter. For information on all vacancies in ERS, contact the ERS Employment Office, USDA, EMS, PD, Room 1451, South Building, Washington, D.C., 20250-350D (2D2-447-4915).

New Appointees Named at Census

President Reagan has nominated John Keane to be Director of the Census Bureau. Now President of a consulting

service involved in corporate planning, marketing planning, environmental scanning assignments, and futures studies, he previously held management and planning positions in three U.S. companies.

Charles A. Waite, previously Associate Director for National Analysis and Projections at the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) in the Department of Commerce, has been appointed to succeed the late Shirley Kallek as Associate Director for Economic Fields at the Bureau of the Census. Waite, who joined BEA in 1964, directed the preparation of the public sector portion of the GNP accounts from 1964 to 1976. In 1972, he was named Chief of the Government Division, and in 1976 he was appointed BEA's Chief Economist. A consultant to numerous international organizations, Waite also served on the staff of the President's Reorganization Project for the Federal Statistical System during 1978-79. His new responsibilities include managing the Census of Agriculture.

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